Newsletter of the Birdwatchers' Society of Andhra Pradesh
New Series Volume 11 Number 5 June 2014

FIELD OUTING: Sunday, 22nd June 2014: Umamaheshwaram (foothills of Nallamala Hills). Meeting point: Punjagutta Junction, 6.00AM.

140 kms from Hyderabad, near Achampet on the Nagarjuna-Srisailam highway. Umamaheshwaram falls under the Nallamalai forest range. The location offers lovely views of surrounding forest-clad hills and is flanked by sheer cliffs. There's also a Shiva temple perched on the cliffs. While woodland bird species abound here, look out for rarities like the Yellow-throated Bulbul and the Loten's Sunbird.

We will be car-pooling on fuel cost-sharing basis. This will be a full-day trip. For further details and to co-ordinate, please contact Ms Surekha Aitabathula (99490-38532).

INDOOR MEETING: Talk by Mr S Raghupathy, Executive Director, CII - Godrej Green Business Centre, on 'Greening India'
Tuesday, 10th June 2014, 6.30PM: Goethe-zentrum Hyderabad, 20 Journalist's Colony, Road No. 3, Banjara Hills, Hyderabad – 500 034. (For directions, please contact 94905-09251 or 040-65526443/23350040)

Amongst the increasing anthropogenic activities like farming, forestry and urbanization that have been observed to cause significant changes to the environments and result in habitat fragmentation and creation of modified land types, urbanization is accelerating at an unprecedented rate. An estimated 45% of the world's population of almost seven billion is living in cities, a percentage which is expected to rise significantly in the next few years. This increase in urbanization is expected to have severe detrimental effects on biodiversity.

In line with the increasing importance being given worldwide to protection of the environment and biodiversity, CII – Godrej GBC, a centre of excellence for energy and environment, with extensive experience in the area of adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, is currently working on various initiatives of Landscapes & Biodiversity conservation. Mr Raghupathy's talk will focus mainly on how to attract biodiversity in urban spaces and what CII – Godrej GBC is currently doing towards this initiative.

A Night in the Hills

Text and photos: Humayun Taher

Lawrence has been pestering me to go on an overnight trip and I am quite willing to go with him. We agree that we will make an overnight to the hills of the V… range and hopefully will be able to beat the forty-plus degree heat and maybe even be really lucky and get an April shower too. This last doesn't materialise though and the only shower we get is a few seconds of somewhat indifferent and desultory rain while we are still some considerable distance from our ultimate destination. The beating of the forty-plus heat however, is not a difficult matter at all. The thermometer in the car proudly stands at 33 degrees throughout the time we are in the hills!

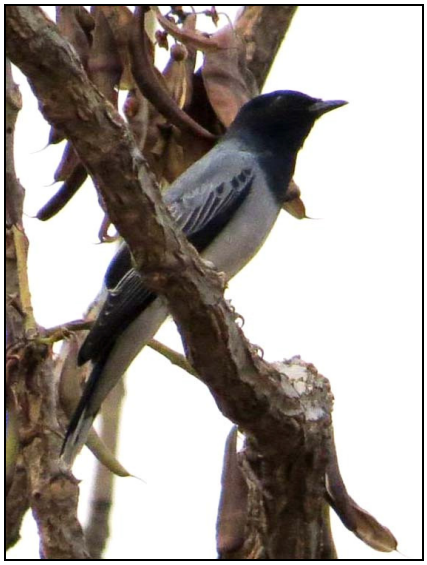
We start off from the city just after lunch. The roads seem to have been completely taken over by the politicians. We encounter police *chowkies* every few miles, though in fairness I have to say we are never asked to stop. Every available open space has been taken up by the political entourages; people clapping and cheering wildly at every word that drips from the hallowed lips of the white-clad orator up on the platform. How they manage to get along in that fierce afternoon heat is beyond me. Politics is obviously a far more demanding occupation than we give it credit for being.

Indian Roller

Sparkling conversation and discussion on the merits and finesse of Hindustani classical music lessens the distance to the hills and when we reach our destination, we are pleasantly surprised to note that we are a good 20 minutes earlier than our anticipated arrival time. So, taking advantage of these few minutes, we repair to the nearest *chai* shop for a much-needed cup of the vital oolong. While sipping, we are entertained by the raucous calls of parakeets, mynas and treepies that seem to have gathered together to welcome us to their domain. Much cheered by the presence of these feathered denizens, we hasten to bring out our optics and start off down the steps leading into the valley.

There seems to be a distinct drop in the avian activity here. Where we usually see large numbers of birds, there is little to be seen. As we reach the valley floor and start to walk up it, the mystery is solved. A film-crew has taken over (there is no other word) almost the entire place. Huge generator vans are parked along the trail and, most horrifying of all, a group of carpenters are building what looks like a haunted house right in the middle of the jungle. There is also a gaggle of people pointing their bright reflectors here and there with complete abandon. Both of us are totally enraged at this wanton rape of the area. Talks with the foreman of the group elicit the information that permission has been obtained, though the foreman is recalcitrant as to the actual authority from whom said permission was sought.

We realise that it is quite useless for us to expect to see anything here. We can only hope that the disturbance does not extend towards the grasslands that lie further ahead. Incongruously, we learn that the film that is being shot is apparently a horror movie. I am tempted to tell the foreman that all he needs to do to make a very spine-chilling movie of this genre is to simply film his men going about their work. They are certainly making a horror of the area and are far more vicious and destructive than any ogre they can possibly conceive.



Black-headed Cuckooshrike male

So we move off further ahead and take the path that leads out of the valley and towards an area that still seems to be relatively free of disturbance. This area is mostly dry grass with a few stunted trees scattered about. There is a tiny steam cutting through this area, the presence of which is clearly marked out by the verdant green foliage of the trees on its banks, showing a sharp contrast to the sepia and browns of the trees in other places. And it is also immediately clear that the waters of the stream are not just sustaining the trees; most of the birds we sight this evening are to be seen mostly on these trees.

We have a fair selection of interesting sightings, starting with the delicately marked Black-headed Cuckooshrike (*Coracina melanoptera*) and going on through the Grey-bellied Cuckoo (*Cacomantis passerinus*) to the Common Woodshrike (*Tephrodornis pondcerianus*). This last gives us a tough time to identify actually, but we manage to pin it down in the end.

Grey-bellied Cuckoo

Lawrence meantime is charmed by his sighting of a sweetly-singing Common Iora (*Aegithina tiphia*) and a pair of Jungle Prinia (*Prinia sylvatica*) playing about close to him. I myself am thrilled to bits by the presence of the Eurasian Wryneck (*Jynx Torquilla*), a bird that is not unknown from these hills but remains a very difficult and elusive creature to get a satisfactory sighting of. I have to, however, be content with the sighting: the shades of evening combining with the shade where the bird is sitting is a composition not at all conducive to the taking of even a record photograph.

Not that I really mind; after all, the camera is only a pleasant companion and not the reason for our trip. It is better to get a good look at the bird through the binoculars than waste time trying to get it in the viewfinder. This view is something that even the Iora appears to subscribe to and, in approval, it bursts into song again. As Lawrence is at some pains to point out, the song notes are quite distinct, completely different from the usual calls of the species: This seems to be a particularly talented individual! Very sweet music he is making, to be sure.

Dusk comes quickly down in the hills; and as the shadows advance, we deem it prudent to retire while we can yet see where we are putting our feet. So back up to the friendly shelter of the *chai* shop and then into the town to find a suitable hostelry where we can freshen up a trifle and quell the pangs of hunger before setting out once again for the creatures of the night. Having refreshed ourselves with a nice cold tub and a deliciously spicy curry we return to the valley, armed with torches and headlamps to see whether the night species at least are still present or whether the horrors of the horror film have horrified them also into fleeing the area.

It seems that the night species too have fallen prey to the privations of the filming party. We see a couple of scurrying Wild Boar, a single Black-naped Hare and a small party of Spotted Deer. A solitary Franklin's or Savanna Nightjar (*Caprimulgus affinis*) sounds forth its monotonous call and that is all that we get. Nary a single other sound, except for some species of chant from the temple and the coughing of the film set watchman.

It is maddening to think that this area, which should have at least three resident species of owls is now so barren and lifeless. In earlier trips we have seen as many as four different species of owls in this single valley and now there are not even four species in total of night birds, let alone just owls. It is quite obvious that the birds have been permanently driven out of the area. Rather despondently we return to our lodgings and turn in, hoping for better luck on the morrow.

After an early cup of tea, we start back towards the valley for the morning sightings. Deciding to first visit the view-point we accordingly head that way and are rewarded with a sighting of a Shikra (*Accipiter badius*) polishing off some prey that it seems to have caught. A couple of bites and whatever it was is gone and the Shikra wags its tail and launches itself out of the tree to try its luck further. A pair of Rufous Treepies (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*) is also cackling about something and a considerable covey of Indian Peafowl (*Pavo cristatus*) scuttle into cover at our approach.

But for the most part, even this area looks quite barren and sterile. It is either the summer or the excessive disturbance that is causing the birds to desert this area. And I rather incline to the latter reason. Summer may not be conducive to birds but it would not create so sterile a landscape. However, the presence of a floating white ribbon, betokening the presence of an adult male Asian Paradise-flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*), cheers us up somewhat and we repair back to the grasslands where we had good sightings the previous evening.

Bay-backed Shrike adult (above) and juvenile (below)

Lawrence is convinced by now that the best time to see birds is the evening, and over the next three hours I am convinced that he is correct. Even the place where we saw so many species the previous evening is now almost lifeless. A few Babblers and the odd Common Tailorbird (*Orthotomus sutorius*), Mynas and the ubiquitous and omnipresent Bulbuls are the only birds to be seen. We linger here for some time, finding a bit of shade under a scrubby tree on a hillside but there is little to be seen.

The morning is now getting uncomfortably hot so we start to contemplate retreat before we get completely fried. So back to the friendly comfort of the *chai* shop, a capital breakfast and so back home, to the accompaniment of further Hindustani Classical Music. And although the list of species seen on this trip (71) is not vast, we are not despairing as the actual purpose of the trip, which was to get away from the humdrum of the daily grind, has been admirably achieved.

I only hope that the owls are as disappointed at our absence as we are by theirs!

Plum-headed Parakeet male

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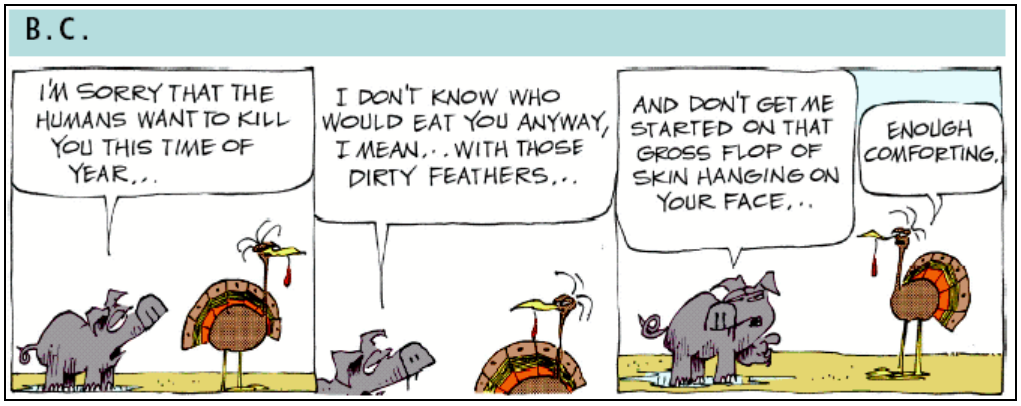
Bird Humour


B.C.
I'M SORRY THAT THE HUMANS WANT TO KILL YOU THIS TIME OF YEAR...
I DON'T KNOW WHO WOULD EAT YOU ANYWAY, I MEAN...WITH THOSE DIRTY FEATHERS...
AND DON'T GET ME STARTED ON THAT GROSS FLOP OF SKIN HANGING ON YOUR FACE...
ENOUGH COMFORTING.

(From Times of India, 29-09-2012)

Bird of the Month

Text and photos: Umesh Mani

Red-wattled Lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*)

Red-wattled Lapwing adult (L) (Inkriyal, 29-11-2009) **and chicks (R)** (ICRISAT, 31-05-2009)

Order: Charadriiformes
Family: Charadriidae
Genus: *Vanellus*
Species: *V. indicus*
Size: 32-35 cm

Description &distribution: The Red-wattled Lapwing is a large plover. The underparts are white all the way down to the tail except for a black 'bib' covering throat and chest; the white also runs up along the flanks and forms prominent white ear patches. The head is also black, while the back and wings are a metallic light brown or bronze with a purplish sheen. In flight, the Red-wattled Lapwing displays white wing-bars. The short tail is black-tipped. The bird is easily identified due to the distinctive red 'wattles' or flaps of skin in front of the eyes, nearly touching the base of the black-tipped red bill. The legs are long and yellow. Males and females are alike, though the female may be smaller. Young birds are duller in colour.

The Red-wattled Lapwing is a resident breeder across most of its range, from parts of West Asia eastwards across South Asia and parts of South-east Asia. Besides the nominate race found across the Indian sub-continent, three other races are recognized – *V. i. aigneri*, found in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan and the Indus Valley, is somewhat paler and larger than the nominate; *V. i. lankae* of Sri Lanka is smaller and darker; and *V. i. atronuchalis*, found in north-eastern India and eastern Bangladesh, has isolated white cheeks surrounded by black.

Behaviour: The Red-wattled Lapwing is usually seen in pairs or trios or, as sometimes seen during the non-breeding season, in small groups. It is usually found not far from water – well-watered open grasslands, ploughed fields, tanks, puddles, and in forests around rain-filled depressions. Populations spread out during the monsoons, since more number of suitable habitats become available. It may also migrate altitudinally during spring and autumn.

The Red-wattled Lapwing tends to run about in short spurts. It is highly vigilant and easily alarmed, and hence can be a nuisance for poachers or others trying to creep up closer to the birds (e.g. birdwatchers). The noisy call is easily recognized, and is often described as *did-you-do-it* or *did-he-do-it*. The bird feeds at night too – leading to the call being often heard at night – and is said to be especially active around the full moon. The diet includes a variety of insects, snails and other invertebrates, and some grains. Its flight usually consists of slow, deliberate flapping, but it is capable of surprising agility when threatened.

Nesting: The Red-wattled Lapwing breeds mainly between March and August. Courtship display, often involving many males, includes puffing out the feathers, pointing the beak to the sky, and shuffling around the female.

The clutch consists of 3-4 black-blotched buff-coloured eggs laid in nests which are nothing more than a scrape or depression in the ground, sometimes ringed by pebbles or the droppings of goats or hares. On occasion, they have been known to nest on roof-tops in residential colonies and even among the stones between rail tracks. The bird defends its nest aggressively, resorting to dive-bombing when required. It may also use distraction displays or spread out its wings to chase away smaller threats. Incubation duties are shared by both parents. The Red-wattled Lapwing also wets its belly feathers to cool the eggs during very hot weather and to provide water to chicks.

Local name: The Red-wattled Lapwing is known as *'titeeri'* or *'titori'* in Hindi, *'yennapa chitawa'* in Telugu, *'aalkaati'* (i.e. 'one that shows the presence of humans') in Tamil and *'tamramukhi tittibhak'* in Sanskrit.

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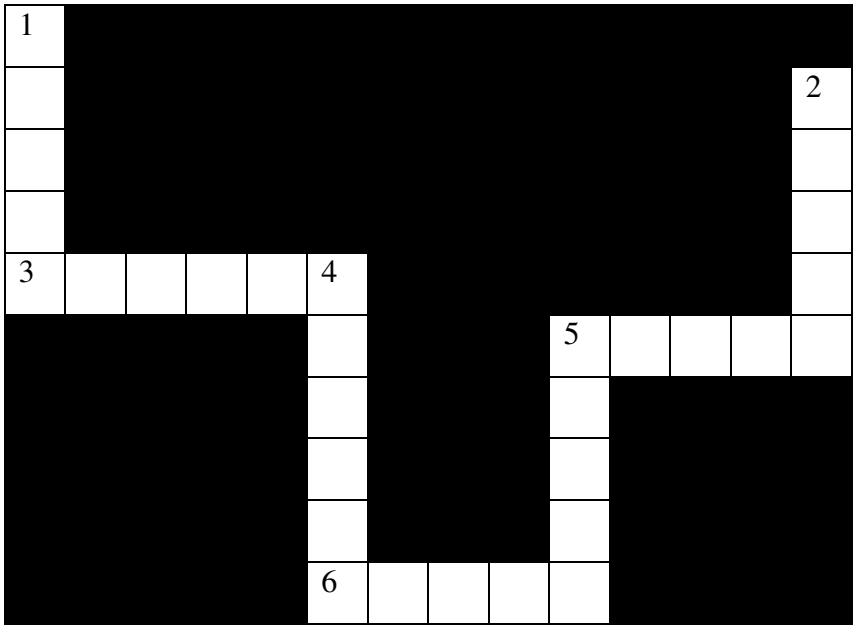
BIRDING CROSSWORD #28

Umesh Mani

The answers to the clues given below are bird names or other birding-related terms. Let's see how many you can find!
(*Solutions in next month's Pitta*)



ACROSS

3 - Kris says 'HA' when he sees this bird? (6)

5 - This hunter relies on his baser instincts (5)

6 - Want your head for this brown owl? (5)

DOWN

1 - These birds steal the slate at least three ways! (5)

2 - This bird is a member of the Hamas? (5)

4 - Misguidedly covet a bird (7)

5 - This nocturnal bird is a vampire slayer? (5)

Solutions to Crossword #27 (Pitta, May 2014)
ACROSS: 6 – MONTAGU'S HARRIER
DOWN: 1 – OSPREY, 2 - OWLET, 3 – WEAVER, 4 – BUSTARD, 5 - ROBIN

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